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The Christian Martyrs;

OR,

THE CONDITIONS OF OBEDIENCE TO THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT:

A

DISCOURSE

BY

J. G. FORMAN,

MINISTER OF THE SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN NANTUCKET; UNTIL RECENTLY MINISTER
OF THE FIRST CHURCH AND CONGREGATION IN WEST BRIDGEWATER, MASS.

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

A Friendly Letter to said Church and Congregation

ON THE

PRO-SLAVERY INFLUENCES THAT OCCASIONED HIS REMOVAL.

BOSTON:

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following Discourse is published by the request, and at the expense, of a portion of the parish in West Bridgewater, Mass., of which I was, until recently, the minister. It has been delivered in three of the Bridgewater; originally at the South as a lyceum-lecture, and afterwards, with some changes in its structure and language, and the prefixing of a text, as a religious discourse in the Unitarian Congregational Churches of the West and East. The historical narrative, the authorities, and argument, remain as first written. Though well received abroad, it offended some of my own people; but, since I no longer stand in the same relation to them, I can hardly think its candid perusal will have the same effect now. The question discussed is one of great importance; and, though the truth seems almost too plain to need more than a simple statement of it, yet the minds of thousands have become so blinded by party zeal, and the sophistries of their political leaders, in support of the Fugitive Slave Law, as not to see it. Knowing the great weight attached to eminent examples and the authority of great names, I adopted this method of presenting the subject, because I felt sensible it would have greater influence than a discussion of the abstract principles involved in it. To occupy common ground with the Apostles of our Lord, with the Christian Martyrs, with the Protestants of the Reformation, and the Puritans of England, and to be sustained by the most learned and eminent of scholars and divines in Church and State, is a consideration of no little weight and importance. It was my object, therefore, in connection with a clear statement of the truth, to show how amply it is sustained by this kind of evidence, and to present it in such a light as to make it tell upon our present duty.

The Letter, which I have added on my own responsibility, together with the Discourse, though intended in part for the benefit of a particular locality, are adapted to general circulation, and are commended to the friendly consideration of those into whose hands they may fall, and more especially of my brethren in the ministry.

NANTUCKET, MASS.

J. G. F.

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DISCOURSE.

"THEY WILL DELIVER YOU UP TO THE COUNCILS, AND THEY WILL SCOURGE YOU IN THEIR SYNAGOGUES; AND YE SHALL BE BROUGHT BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS FOR MY SAKE. . . . THEY SHALL DELIVER YOU UP TO BE AFFLICTED, AND SHALL KILL YOU. . . . FEAR NOT THEM THAT KILL THE BODY, BUT ARE NOT ABLE TO KILL THE SOUL." — *Jesus*.

"THEN PETER AND THE OTHER APOSTLES ANSWERED AND SAID, WE OUGHT TO OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN." — *Acts of the Apostles*.

It has lately become a question of great importance, whether there is any limit to the obedience we owe to civil governments. Through the influence of distinguished statesmen and the teaching of popular divines, many of our people have been persuaded that they owe an unlimited and indiscriminate obedience to the laws of the land; that they may not refuse obedience to a particular law, however repugnant it is to their moral sense, the Christian religion, or the law of God. The only question they are to ask is, Is it the law of the land? Was it enacted by the regularly constituted authorities? If so, it must be obeyed at all hazards. In determining one's duty, the inquiry is not to be entertained, whether the law conflicts with the principles of justice and humanity, the precepts of our religion, and the divine law. If the government has enacted it, we have only to obey. That such a doctrine should be received and acted upon by the descendants of the English Puritans; that they should have so soon forgotten the dis-

obedience of their fathers, for many long years, to the Act of Uniformity of Charles II., and other penal laws, and the fines, imprisonments, and persecutions they suffered for conscience' sake, is almost incredible. It can only be accounted for by the moral degeneracy of a portion of their children, under the corrupting influences of material prosperity, and the demoralizing tendency of political organizations.*

The question is not whether an individual may forcibly resist the government, molest its officers, and incite others to civil war and bloodshed. It is not whether we ought not to *submit* to the law. If men can be found who are bad enough to hold an office which makes it their business to

* "If, by any act of legislation by this confederated government, we are required to restore to them (the slaveholders) that property (their slaves) to which they have a legal right, *however much we may doubt the morality of that claim, or of the law upon which it is founded*, the duty of good citizenship and the claims of true patriotism would demand obedience to the law." — Rev. L. E. LATHROP, of Auburn, N.Y., quoted in the Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-slavery Society for 1851.

Similar sentiments have been uttered by a large number of pro-slavery clergymen at the North; and some of the discourses containing them published by Union Safety Committees, and circulated gratuitously, in large numbers, by members of Congress, under the franking privilege. A gentleman writing from Washington, April 11, 1851, says, "You may think some of my reflections upon pro-slavery clergymen too harsh. You would not, had you seen the cart-loads of their arguments in favor of the Fugitive Act, and slavery generally, kept for distribution in this city, and now kept, which I have seen." In this category of clergymen, we may name Rev. Robert Davidson, D.D., of New Brunswick, N.J.; Rev. Ichabod S. Spencer, D.D., of Brooklyn, N.Y.; Rev. Nathan S. S. Beman, D.D., of Troy, N.Y.; Rev. John M. Krebbs, D.D., of New York city; Rev. John C. Lord, D.D., of Buffalo, N.Y.; Rev. Moses Stuart, of Andover; Rev. Orville Dewey, D.D.; Rev. William Crowell, of Waterville, Me.; Rev. Dr. Taylor, of New Haven; Rev. Dr. Parker, of Philadelphia; Rev. Bishop Hopkins, of Vermont.

The following is an instance of the same kind of preaching at the South, which is the universal Christianity of that region: — "The New Testament decides, in the plainest terms, that Christians are bound to *acquiesce in and support* those laws and regulations concerning slavery which are enacted by the respective civil governments under which they live. . . . Let him (the clergyman) at all times preach *unconditional* submission to civil laws and institutions." — Rev. THEODORE CLAPP, of New Orleans. Pro-slavery statesmen, jurists, and lawyers, inculcate the same sentiments.

execute a wicked law, and they will execute it, we must and ought to submit, until it can be repealed, or rendered a dead letter, by the force of public sentiment. The right of a peaceful or bloody revolution is not the question, though the latter is sanctioned by the general opinion and practice of mankind. But it is simply whether a conscientious man, in the fear of God, may calmly take the responsibility of disobeying a wicked law, and bear the penalty of his disobedience. To my understanding and moral sense, it is plainly the duty of every Christian to take this stand. It is the course I have sincerely recommended to you in reference to the recent law, requiring us to deliver a certain description of our fellow-men, many of them disciples of our divine Master, into slavery; forbidding us, under pains and penalties, to aid and succor them in their sore distress.* It is a course that has the sanction of the most eminent examples mentioned in the Bible. It is confirmed by the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and sealed by their blood, which was shed by the civil authorities, as the penalty of their disobedience. It is commended to us by "the noble army of martyrs," who were cruelly tormented and put to death because of their disobedience to wicked laws. It is enforced by the glorious example of the English Puritans and Dissenters, whose children we are, and rendered illustrious by good men in every age. It is maintained by legal authorities of the greatest eminence and learning, and is only denied in this country by the political, legal, and clerical demagogues that hoodwink and deceive the people.

It is my purpose, in the present discourse, to give an historical sketch of several illustrious martyrdoms under the Roman empire, in confirmation of this doctrine; to adduce some eminent authorities on the subject; and to intersperse

* Reference is here made to a Discourse on the Fugitive Slave Law, delivered some months before.

the whole with such reasoning and reflections of my own as seem appropriate to the theme, and the times in which we live.

We have been taught by our ancestors, and in all histories of the church, to regard with peculiar reverence and affection the memory of the Christian martyrs. We have learned to look upon them as holy men, who lived in an age of wickedness and persecution, distinguished alike by their virtues, and their fidelity to their religion and the law of God. They have been so regarded by the enlightened sentiment of the Christian world, and have left imperishable names on the pages of church history. In the language of the ancient liturgy, they are called, with approbation, "the noble army of martyrs;" their memory is embalmed in the prayers of the church, and their names recorded in the calendar of the saints. The reason they are thus honored is because their conduct has been approved by Christians in all ages, and their example deemed worthy to be followed by all who bear the Christian name.

The cruel sufferings and death they underwent, rather than violate the precepts of their religion, are awful in the extreme, and show how unswerving was their fidelity to conscience and the law of God, which no human law, no earthly consideration, could induce them to disregard. They were burned at the stake, tortured on the rack, scourged, stoned, stabbed with forks of iron, fastened to the cross and gibbet, put to the sword, devoured by wild beasts, flayed alive. Some had their tongues cut out; some were starved with hunger; some had their hands cut off, and were otherwise dismembered. Their torments were as various as the ingenuity of wicked men could devise, and their numbers almost incredible. It is said, that, notwithstanding the horrible cruelties inflicted upon them, they endured their sufferings with wonderful fortitude, counting

it a joyful death to die for the religion they professed, and receive a martyr's crown. So great was the number who were thus called to suffer for the cause of Christ, that Hierome, in his epistle to Cromatius and Heliodorus, says, "There is no day in the whole year unto which the number of five thousand martyrs cannot be ascribed, except only the first day of January."*

The first and most illustrious of the Christian martyrs was St. Stephen, whose martyrdom is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles; at which Saul, afterwards the Apostle Paul, was present, consenting to his death. It was on this occasion those memorable words were uttered, so often repeated by the martyrs of succeeding ages, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." This expression arose from Stephen at the moment when he was stoned to death by the civil authorities; to which he added the generous and forgiving prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." What effect this scene might have had on Saul, who had doubtless listened to the speech of Stephen before the council, and, with them, beheld his face glowing with a serene and heavenly expression, "as it had been the face of an angel," it is impossible to tell; but we may well conjecture, that it was not without its effect as he journeyed on his way to Damascus, and perhaps led him into that penitent and meditative frame of mind, in which he had the vision, and was so suddenly converted.

It is stated that the death of Stephen was followed by a severe persecution in Jerusalem, in which two thousand Christians, with Nicanor the deacon, were martyred, and many others obliged to leave that country.

Of the twelve apostles, the only one who escaped a violent death was John, the beloved disciple; though he suffered the equivalent of martyrdom, — having been cast, by

* Fox's Book of Martyrs.

order of the Emperor Domitian, into a caldron of boiling oil, from which he escaped with his life, and was afterwards banished to the isle of Patmos. The rest of the apostles were crucified, beheaded, and otherwise cruelly put to death. It is mentioned of the Apostle Peter, who was crucified, that, when he came to the place of execution, he requested of the officers that he might be crucified with his head downwards, alleging that he was not worthy to suffer in the same manner his divine Master had done before him. His request was granted; and St. Gregory states that his body, with that of St. Paul, was buried in the catacombs, two miles out of Rome.* In these instances, the apostles were convicted of having disobeyed some law or command of the civil authority, that conflicted with their moral and religious duties; and they suffered martyrdom as the penalty of their disobedience.

It was during the first three hundred years of the Christian era that the greatest number of martyrdoms occurred. The Roman empire at that time embraced almost the whole of the civilized world. It had an established religion, consisting of pagan rites and ceremonies; and the people were required by law to repair to heathen temples, and offer sacrifices and worship to the heathen deities. This system of idolatry was interwoven with the laws, government, and political institutions of the empire. Sometimes we hear it said in our day, as an apology for the continuance of American slavery, that it is interwoven with the laws, the governments, and political institutions of the Southern States. It was so with the religion of the Roman empire. The Roman people and their rulers were as jealous of the rights and honors of their gods, as the people of the South are of their alleged right of property in human beings. The pagan worship was "the peculiar institution" of the Roman em-

* Butler's Lives of the Saints.

pire; and the government and people of that empire were as much opposed to any "interference" with it, as our neighbors of the South can possibly be with their "peculiar institution." When this fact is considered, it will not strike you as very surprising that they should have enacted laws against the introduction of any new religion into the state, and against all secret assemblies of the people; and that those who were found violating these laws should have been severely punished. They certainly had as good ground to enact such laws as our Southern States have to enact that no one shall preach anti-slavery sentiments, or circulate anti-slavery writings, denominated "incendiary publications," in the South. There are many in our day who regard such preaching as the essence of Christianity; and, were they to attempt to propagate it in the Southern States of this republic, would very soon meet with the fate of the martyrs whose history we are considering. To preach practical Christianity in the South at this day would provoke as dangerous and bitter a persecution, as it did on its first introduction in the Roman empire.

This simple and brief statement of the government, laws, and religion of the Roman people, will enable us to understand the cause of the persecutions that were waged against the Christians during that period of the church. From the reign of Nero to that of Dioclesian, a period not far from two hundred and fifty years, there were ten general persecutions of the Christians. Many distinguished fathers and bishops of the church received the crown of martyrdom; and hundreds of thousands more were put to death, because they confessed that they were Christians, and refused to obey those laws and edicts of the empire which required them to sacrifice to the gods, or enlist as soldiers in the imperial armies, both of which they deemed equally inconsistent with the precepts of their religion. Clement of Alexandria, who wrote soon after the death of

Commodus, says, "Many martyrs are daily burned, crucified, beheaded, before our eyes." *

For more than two centuries, the primitive Christians steadfastly refused to do military service, deeming it contrary to their religion for a Christian to fight; but, at a later period, when the purity of the Christian faith had become in a measure lost, many who embraced it continued their profession as soldiers, or entered the service on the requisition of the emperor. Of this description there was a legion, consisting of more than six thousand men, which contained none but Christians. It was called the Theban Legion. This was about two hundred and eighty-six years after Christ. While this legion was under the command of Maximian, a general order was given to the whole army to sacrifice to the gods; and they were required to take the oath of allegiance, and swear at the same time to assist the emperor to extirpate Christianity. This they could not do, and remain true to their religion. Having resolutely refused either to sacrifice or take the oaths prescribed, Maximian, in a paroxysm of rage, ordered the legion to be decimated. Every tenth man having been put to the sword, the remainder of the legion still continued inflexible, when he ordered them to be decimated a second time. But this second severity made no more impression on them than the first. The soldiers preserved their fortitude and their principles; but, by the advice of their officers, drew up a remonstrance to the emperor, in which they told him that they were his subjects and his soldiers, but they could not at the same time forget the Almighty. "*While your commands,*" said they, "*are not contradictory to those of our common Master, we shall always be ready to obey, as we have hitherto; but, when the orders of our prince and those of the Almighty differ, we must always obey the latter.*" Our arms

* Neander's Church History.

are devoted to the emperor's use, and shall be directed against his enemies; but we cannot submit to stain our hands with the effusion of Christian blood. And how, indeed, could you, O emperor! be sure of our allegiance and fidelity, should we violate our obligations to our God? You command us to search out and destroy Christians.* It is not necessary to look any further for persons of that denomination. We ourselves are such, and we glory in the name. We saw our companions fall without the least opposition, and thought them happy in dying for the sake of Christ. Nothing shall make us lift up our hands against our sovereign. We had rather die wrongfully, and by that means preserve our innocence, than live under a load of guilt. Whatever you command, we are ready to suffer. We confess ourselves to be Christians, and therefore cannot persecute Christians, nor sacrifice to idols."†

This pathetic and Christian address failed to produce any good effect upon the mind of the emperor. Instead of softening his disposition towards them, he was only the more enraged at the unanimity and firmness with which they refused obedience to his commands, and immediately ordered that the whole legion should be put to death; which was accordingly done by the other troops, who cut them to pieces with their swords; in which the saying of our Lord was remarkably fulfilled, that they who take the sword shall perish by the sword.

This was a dreadful martyrdom; but it was no more than was suffered in all the large cities and provinces of the empire by peaceable and unoffending Christians, whose only crime consisted in their refusal to obey the legally con-

* This command finds a parallel in our Fugitive Slave Law, which authorizes the slaveholder to "search out" and capture men and women, many of them Christians; and commands us to "aid" him in returning them to slavery, — a much greater crime than to put them to death.

† Fox's Book of Martyrs.

stituted authorities, when they were commanded to injure and destroy their fellow Christians, to sacrifice to idols, and to blaspheme the name of Christ.

Under the Emperor Severus there was a bloody persecution waged against the Christians in all parts of the empire. It was during this reign that Irenæus, the Bishop of Lyons, was put to death, after suffering many tortures; and, together with him, almost all the Christians of that vast and populous city, whose numbers could not be reckoned up, so that the streets of the city flowed with the blood of Christians.*

One of the most illustrious of the Christian martyrs was St. Justin, commonly known as Justin Martyr. He was a man renowned for his learning and Christian piety, and rendered great service to the Christians by his writings. At the time he was arraigned before the tribunal which sentenced him, with many others, to a violent death, he made a full and clear statement of the Christian faith, and of their reasons for disobeying the law requiring them to sacrifice to the gods; after which the governor pronounced this sentence upon them: "*They who refuse to obey the imperial edict, let them be first scourged, and then beheaded, according to the laws.*"* These holy men blessed God that they were permitted to seal the truth with their blood; and, the sentence being shortly afterward executed, they passed to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

The martyrdom of the aged and venerable Polycarp evinces the same faith and moral courage that marked the character of Irenæus and Justin, and the same resolute firmness in refusing obedience to an unjust law. When he stood before the proconsul, who urged him to swear and curse Christ, promising to release him, the proposal was

* Cave's Lives of the Fathers.

resented with a noble scorn, and drew from Polycarp this generous confession: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any thing but good: how can I curse him, my King and my Saviour?" The proconsul again commanded him to swear by the genius of Cæsar; to which he replied, "I tell you frankly I am a Christian. Would you know what the doctrine of Christianity is, appoint me an hour, and hear me." The proconsul, touched with a feeling of compassion for his age and noble bearing, urged him to persuade the people. He answered again, "To you I choose rather to address my discourse; *for our religion teaches us to pay due honor to the powers ordained of God*, SO FAR AS IT IS NOT CONTRARY TO THE PRECEPTS OF OUR DIVINE MASTER. As for them (referring to the multitude), I think them not competent judges to whom I should apologize, or give an account of my faith."

The governor having once more urged him to comply with the law, and threatened him with the wild beasts and the stake, he still refused; and it was proclaimed by the herald, "Polycarp has declared himself to be a Christian." With these words was pronounced the sentence of death; and the Roman populace, with an infuriate shout, cried, "This is the teacher of atheism, the father of the Christians, the enemy of our gods, by whom so many have been turned from their worship and sacrifice." When he was taken to the stake to be burned, they were about to fasten him with nails; but he said, "Leave me thus: He who has strengthened me to encounter the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake." Before the fire was lighted, he offered up this prayer:—

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, from whom we have received the knowledge of thyself; God of angels and of the whole creation, of the human race, and of the just that live in thy presence,—I praise thee that thou hast judged me worthy of this day and

hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of thy holy martyrs, and drink of Christ's cup for the resurrection to eternal life. Wherefore I praise thee for all thy mercies; I bless thee; I glorify thee, through the eternal High Priest, thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ; to whom, with thee and the Holy Spirit, be glory now and for ever."

The manner in which this aged servant of Christ underwent his sufferings and death evinced the sublimest moral and Christian heroism; and, as Neander remarks, "was so ordered that he might exhibit what was the essential character of evangelical martyrdom." He was nearly a hundred years of age at the time of his death, and had been a disciple of the Apostle John in his youth. Irenæus says of him, that "he lived a very long time, and arrived at an exceeding great age, when he underwent a most glorious and illustrious martyrdom for the faith."*

It was my desire to have mentioned a few particulars of the martyrdom of Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, who was placed in the amphitheatre at Rome, and the lions let loose upon him, who quickly devoured him; and of Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, who, when he was advised to comply with the law, requiring sacrifices to the gods, answered, "No: I am a Christian, and cannot obey your law." But the importance of what remains will not permit me to occupy more of your time with them. There was a class of martyrdoms for another cause, however, which I cannot wholly pass over.

I have already mentioned, that the Christians, during the first and second centuries of the Christian church, refused to comply with the laws requiring military service, as the Quakers have done in modern times, and many of them suffered martyrdom for this cause. The following instance will serve as an example of this class: A young man, named

* Neander, Cave, and Milman.

Maximilian, was brought before the proconsul as a proper subject for military duty. As soon as he came up, and was about to be measured to see if his size corresponded with the standard of the service, he exclaimed, "I cannot serve as a soldier; I cannot do what is wrong; I am a Christian, and cannot fight." He persisted in his refusal to become a soldier, and was put to death. And this is but one of many instances in which they bore a like testimony to the unlawfulness of war to a Christian.

Of several Christians who were put to torture in order to draw confessions from them, one of them gave signs of great agony; whereupon the proconsul said, "*You should have obeyed the law of the emperor.*" He replied, with a strong spirit, "*I reverence the law of God more than that of the emperor.*" To one who had read the Scriptures at an assembly of Christians, held in his own house, the proconsul said, "You ought not to have received them." He replied, under the rack, "*I could not do otherwise than receive my brethren.*"* "But the emperor's command," said the proconsul, "should have been of more consequence to you." "God," he replied, "*is greater than the emperor.*"†

I have mentioned this class of instances to show that the early Christians not only refused to obey the law when it interfered with their religious faith and the worship of God, but when it conflicted with the moral precepts of Christianity, and the duties they owed their fellow-men. It is the testimony of Giesler, that "the Christians were con-

* The Christians of the United States have now a like opportunity to show their reverence for God's higher law of Christian love and mercy, by receiving the hunted fugitive from Southern bondage, and aiding him to escape from the oppressor. Should they be visited with the penalties of the recent law on this subject, and the government officials say to them, "You should have obeyed the law," they may well reply, in the language of this old Christian martyr, "I could not do otherwise than receive my brethren."

† Neander's Church History.

stantly obliged to annex a condition (in their promises of obedience to the civil authorities), namely, that the commands of the magistrate should not contradict the divine law."

Such is a brief sketch of some of the martyrdoms that occurred during the primitive ages of the church, under the emperors of Rome, showing that the Christians of that period were unanimous in regard to the duty of disobeying all laws that are contrary to the precepts and morality of the Christian religion. Time would fail me to tell of other Christian martyrs who have since suffered from the persecutions of the Romish church; of Huss and Jerome and Rogers and Hooper and Bradford and Farrar and Ridley and Latimer and Cranmer, and a host of others, of whom their age was not worthy, who bore a like testimony to this rule of duty, and sealed it with their blood.

That the martyrdoms I have sketched were occasioned by the disobedience of the Christians to certain laws of the Roman empire, which they regarded as contrary to the precepts of their religion, is asserted by every church historian who has written on the subject. Neander quotes the following advice of Mæcenas to Augustus, which, he says, expresses the prevailing views of the Roman state at that period: "Worship the gods, in all respects, *according to the laws of your country*, and compel others to do the same. . . . Suffer no man to deny the gods;" or, in other words, suffer no man to be a Christian. The Roman civilian, Julius Paulus, cites, as one of the ruling principles of the civil law, the following provision: "Whoever introduces new religions, the tendency and character of which were unknown, whereby the minds of men might be disturbed, should, if belonging to the higher rank, be banished; if to the lower, be punished with death." "It is easy to see," says Neander, "that Christianity came under the operations of this law, because it induced Roman citizens to renounce

the religion of the state, *to the observance of which they were bound by the laws*; and it introduced a new religion, not admitted by the laws of the state. . . . Hence the common taunt of the Pagans against the Christians, according to Tertullian: *Non licet esse vos* — ‘You are not permitted by the laws;’ and of Celsus, who accuses them of secret compacts, *contrary to the laws.*”

Under the emperor Trajan, a rescript was promulgated, which had special reference to the Christians. Neander says, “The change produced by this rescript was this: Christianity, which hitherto had tacitly passed for an unlawful religion, was now condemned as such *by an express law.*” When one of the more humane of the Roman emperors was inclined to pardon such of the Christians as confessed they were in the wrong, the same historian says, “They could not be induced to acknowledge that they had done wrong: *they rather persisted in that which was forbidden by the laws.*” Again, he says, “It must be allowed that *the laws* denounced death, in general terms, as the penalty for perseverance in Christianity.”*

Giesler, in his Ecclesiastical History, says, “The laws against *religiones peregrinæ* and *collegia illicita* still remained in force, even in reference to the Christians.” Thus it will be seen that the primitive Christians were brought in frequent conflict with the laws of the Roman empire, of which they were themselves the lawful subjects, and many of them citizens by birth. Thus were the predictions of our Lord fulfilled: “They will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge and kill you; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake;” and thus did they continue to act upon that divine maxim of the apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

* Wherein does this differ, in its spirit, from a law which now makes it penal to *persevere* in our Christian duty towards those of our brethren who have escaped from slavery?

For their noble and heroic conduct, their faithfulness to the truth, and their steadfast adherence to righteous principles; for the willingness with which they went to the martyr's stake, rather than abjure their religion, or violate its precepts; counting it joy to suffer for the truth, and glorying in the cross of Christ, we bless their holy memory, and hold them up to the admiring gaze and grateful recollection of mankind. The church consecrates their deeds by religious festivals and sacred days, and continues to remind the multitudes that throng her temples and offer worship in the name of Christ, of "the glorious company of apostles," and "the noble army of martyrs," whose lives and actions have rendered her illustrious in the eyes of the world, and exhibited to such advantage the simple power of Christian faith.

When we remember that the sufferings of these Christian martyrs were among the agencies by which multitudes of pagan worshippers were converted to the truth, appealing as it did to their sympathies, and exhibiting the beauty and power of a religion that could inspire such faith and courage, we see how the wickedness of man is often overruled to subserve the best of purposes. Even the very means by which wicked men undertake to injure a righteous cause are made instrumental in promoting its triumph and success. This has been strikingly verified in the history of Christianity, and in every other instance in which temporal power and authority have been brought against a great moral principle.

" Men slay the prophets ; fagot, rack, and cross
 Make up the groaning record of the past ;
 But evil's triumphs are her endless loss,
 And sovereign beauty wins the soul at last." *

These holy martyrs met with nothing but scorn and ill

* James Russell Lowell.

treatment from the world; but they had an inward faith, that filled them with dauntless courage and a heavenly joy. What sublimer scene can we imagine than that in which the aged Polycarp is brought before the proconsul of Rome, and gives an account of his faith? It was then he uttered the sentiment of every Christian, when he said to the governor, refusing to address himself to the senseless rabble that clamored for his life, “To you I choose rather to address my discourse; *for our religion teaches us to pay due honor to the powers that are ordained of God, so far as it is not contrary to the precepts of our divine Master.*” In these words of the sainted martyr were expressed the true limit of the obedience we owe to the civil government, whether it be a despotism, a monarchy, or a republic. Would that all the bishops and clergy and laity of the present day who profess the same faith were as true to their religion as the venerable Polycarp! As I behold him, in imagination, before that dread tribunal, his locks whitened with the frosts of a hundred years, surrounded by an infuriate mob of heathen worshippers, how sublime the dignity and conscious rectitude with which he declares himself a Christian! What a heavenly light illumines and kindles up his aged eyes, as he answers the proconsul, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any thing but good: how, then, can I curse him, my King and my Saviour?” What courage animates him at the stake, when they propose to fasten him with nails, and he replies, “Leave me thus: He who has strengthened me to encounter the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake”! Ay, there was a nobler courage in the heart of that aged servant of Christ than ever animated the breast of the military conqueror,—a courage that shall live in many a Christian heart, when the trophies of the field and the monuments of brute force are levelled with the dust.

It now remains to consider the conduct of the martyrs in another point of view. Were they justifiable in their disobedience to the civil government, when it required them to do what they deemed contrary to their religion and the law of God? We know that they have been justified by the enlightened sentiment of the Christian world, the voice of the church, and the example of Him who was put to death on Calvary.* But a new doctrine has arisen in later times, that we owe an unconditional and indiscriminate obedience to the laws of the land. The idea that a Christian man should set up his conscience above the law is ridiculed in the high places of the church and state, and a law higher than the constitution of the United States—God's eternal law of right—has become a mark on which great men expend their wit, and excite to boisterous mirth the rabble of mankind. According to these men, the Christian martyrs were fools and fanatics, false to their country, and false to the teachings of that martyred and risen Saviour, for whom they suffered and died. But we deny the interested and perverted judgment of men who are seeking the loaves and fishes of office in both church and state, and place them in their proper company, among the priests and civilians, the consuls and proconsuls of a heathen government that persecuted the Christians, and put to death the martyrs of the church.

We object to this doctrine, because it destroys the individual responsibility of the citizen; it makes the state the keeper of his conscience, and strikes down the fundamental principle of all Protestant churches,—the right of private judgment in matters of faith and moral conduct; which no Christian can yield, and remain faithful to his religion and his God. It is the child of the Romish church, and needs the infallibility of the Pope to sustain it. If we knew that

* "The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die."—JOHN, xix. 7.

our rulers were infallible men, we might confide to them this sacred trust; but, so long as we have so many proofs to the contrary, we cannot do it. We cannot place at their disposal all the cherished principles of our religion, all individual responsibility, beyond their election, and the privilege to legislate away the rights of man. We cannot go back to the darkness and despotism of heathen and papal Rome. We cannot accept this doctrine; no, never! We do not believe it would ever have been advocated in this country by Protestants, had it not become necessary to subserve the ends of the government, and put down the rising conscience of the people of the Free States, lest it should utter its voice against an iniquitous and inhuman law. But, nevertheless, there *is* a limit to the obedience we owe the state; and by trampling down the enlightened conscience of its citizens, the government is destroying the highest and best safeguard of the republic. There *is* a limit to the obedience we owe the civil power; and that limit is clearly indicated in the examples I have brought before you from ecclesiastical history, comprising a few of that noble army of martyrs whose conduct under a tyrannical and oppressive government is still the pride and glory of the church. That limitation is well expressed in the dying testimony of Polycarp. We owe it all honor and obedience, "*so far as it is not contrary to the precepts of our religion;*" and in the condition which Giesler says the Christians under the Roman government were constantly obliged to annex to their promises of obedience, namely, "*that the commands of the magistrate should not contradict the divine law.*" So long as human governments keep within this boundary, our religion teaches us to give them our obedience and support. So far, they are ordained of God, are a terror to evil-doers, and are necessary to the well-being of society. No matter how unwise we may think their legislation, or how hardly it may operate on us as individuals: so long as

they leave us free to practise the precepts of our religion and obey the law of God, it is our duty to honor and uphold them. To concede this, and live up to it, is to be a good and loyal citizen. To concede more than this, and avow our readiness to support and obey whatever laws the government may enact, however unrighteous they may be, however much they may violate our sense of justice and the law of God, is to say that we are ready to do wrong at its bidding, and withhold our allegiance from the government of God. The truth is, whenever a government commands us to do a moral wrong, that moment our obligation to obey it ceases in that particular instance, and a higher law—the law of right—intervenes, and commands us to disobey, and take the consequences. In every such instance, we ought to tell the government plainly and frankly, “We are Christians, and cannot obey this law;” and, if need be, prove our sincerity by suffering its penalties peaceably, for conscience’ sake.

Such a course tends to uphold the authority of government, and is far more honorable and more likely to command its respect than to connive at disobedience, and pretend at the same time to uphold and support the law. The men who would thus deceive the government would, under different circumstances and with sufficient temptation, violate any other law. Let some law be passed of doubtful morality, some law against the rights and liberties of a portion of their fellow-men against whom they have imbibed a prejudice, and, though it conflicts with the Bible, with justice and humanity, with the requirements of the Christian religion, and the principles on which the government was founded, these are the men who are always the most clamorous for the execution of *that* particular law. When the law ought not to be obeyed, they are most loyal in its support. Yet these are the men who are most ready to trample on the laws that regulate

society, whenever they prove obnoxious to their prejudices, or inconsistent with their interests. They are the men who oftenest "take the law into their own hands," and molest their fellow-citizens in the enjoyment of their right of speech, if they happen to use that speech in behalf of human freedom. They are the instigators of mobs, and not unfrequently the actors in them. They can evade and violate the usury-laws; swear in a false invoice in the custom-house, in violation of the tariff-laws; defraud the post-office of its revenue, contrary to law; and sell intoxicating drinks, contrary to the statute. They are the last men in the world who should be trusted with the affairs of government, or the control of the state, because they have no abiding sense of justice in their bosoms, no fixed principles or rules of conduct to guide them in life. Self-interest and prejudice are their ruling motives; and they are neither loyal to the government of the state, nor to the government of God.

In asserting the superior obligation of God's law over all human enactments, we are supported by the most eminent authorities in the church, and the most learned and distinguished writers on the science of government and law. I propose now to adduce a few of these authorities.

Says John Calvin, whose opinions have had such an immense influence in the church: "In the obedience which we have shown to be due to the authority of governors, it is always necessary to make one exception, and that is entitled to our first attention, that it do not seduce us from our obedience to Him to whose will the desire of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty all their sceptres ought to submit. . . . *If they command any thing against him, it ought not to have the least attention.*" *

* Calvin's Institutes, vol. ii. p. 662.

Says Neander: "The essence of Christianity struggles against the demand of a blind submission to human authority."*

Jeremy Taylor thus defines a Christian's duty to the state: "We must obey all human laws appointed and constituted by lawful authority, . . . *all laws, I mean, which are not against the law of God.*"† In a sermon before the king and parliament on the obedience due to magistrates, he says: "But what if our prince or our prelates command things against the word of God? What then? Why, nothing then, but that we must obey God, and not man: there is no dispute of that."‡

Says Chillingworth: "Though seditious men may pretend conscience for a cloak of their rebellion, yet this, I hope, hinders not but that an honest man ought to obey his rightly informed conscience, rather than the unjust commands of his tyrannous superiors; otherwise with what color can you defend the ancient martyrs and apostles, who oftentimes disobeyed the commands of men in authority, and for their disobedience made no other but this apology, 'We ought to obey God rather than men'?"§

Says Rev. Prof. Hodge, of Princeton, N. J.: "This injunction, 'We ought to obey God rather than men,' was the principle which the early Christians avowed, and on which they acted. They disobeyed the Jewish and heathen authorities, whenever they required them to do any thing contrary to the will of God. *There are cases, therefore, in which disobedience is a duty. . . . No command to do any thing morally wrong can be binding.*"

Says Dr. Dwight: "Subjects are bound to obey magistrates, when acting agreeably to the laws, in all cases not

* Church History.

† Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living.

‡ Works, vol. ii. p. 45.

§ Quoted in a Sermon, by Rev. Mr. Dexter, of Boston.

contrary to the will of God, as unfolded in the Scriptures. This I take to be the true import of the directions given by St. Peter and St. Paul.”*

President Wayland, of Brown University, makes the following explicit declaration: “We have no right to obey an unrighteous law, since we must obey God at all hazards.”† In three sermons on the “Duty of Obedience to the Civil Magistrate,” he thus points out the limit of that obedience: “We ought to obey God rather than man. His claim over us transcends that of the civil magistrate. . . . If the magistracy commands us to disobey God, it has transcended its proper powers; its commands are of no authority; and a Christian may not obey them. . . . But this may become a yet more practical matter. The magistrate may not only do wrong himself, but he may command me to do wrong. How shall I regard this command? I will regard it as I do any other command to do wrong,—I will not obey it. I will look the magistracy calmly and respectfully in the face, and declare to it that in this matter I owe it no allegiance. I will have nothing to do with its wrong-doing. The magistracy may punish me: I cannot help that. I will not resist; but I will not do wrong, nor will I be a party to wrong, let the magistracy or aught else command me.”

Prof. Stuart, of Andover, *once* said: “Implicit subjection to the magistrate in cases of a *moral nature*, where he enjoins what God has plainly forbidden, would be a gross violation of the true principles of Christianity.”‡

Rev. Albert Barnes takes the same view. He says in substance: “When the laws interfere with the rights of conscience; when they command any moral wrong, it is

* Quoted in a Sermon, by Rev. Asa D. Smith, D.D., of New York.

† Elements of Moral Science, p. 408.

‡ Commentary on Romans.

our duty to refuse obedience.”* Prof. Park, of Andover, maintains the same doctrine in his election sermon before the Legislature of Massachusetts.

Says Dr. Channing: “Allow it that our moral sense (in regard to slavery) is too scrupulous. We must still reverence and obey it. We have no higher law than our conviction of duty.”†

To these distinguished writers on ethics and religion I add a few authorities on the civil and common law, equally eminent in their sphere.

Says Chief Justice Blackstone: “This law of nature being co-eval with mankind, and dictated by God himself, is superior in obligation to any other: *no human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this*; and such of them as are valid derive all their force and all their authority, mediately or immediately, from this original.” Specifying a particular act forbidden by God’s law, he says: “If any human law should allow or enjoin us to commit it, *we are bound to transgress that human law.*”‡

Lord Chief Justice Hobart, another high English authority, takes the position that “even an act of Parliament made against natural justice . . . is void in itself.”

Vattel, and all writers on international law, declare that “the solemn sanctions of a treaty are void, if the provisions are opposed to natural justice.”

Noyes says that “the inferior must give place to the superior; man’s laws, to God’s laws. If, therefore, any statute-law be enacted contrary to them, it ought not to be considered of any authority in the laws of England.”

Edmund Burke, the great English statesman, thus eloquently maintains the doctrine of the higher law: “We are all born in subjection; all born equally, high or low,

* Commentary on Romans.

† Channing’s Works, vol. vi. p. 308.

‡ Commentaries on the Laws of England, vol. i. pp. 36, 38.

governors and governed, in subjection to one great, immutable, pre-existent law, prior to all our devices, prior to all our contrivances, paramount to all our ideas and all our sensations, antecedent to our very existence; by which we are knit and connected in the eternal frame of the universe, out of which we cannot stir. This great law does not arise from our conventions or compacts: *on the contrary, it gives to our conventions and compacts all the force and sanction they can have.*"

Says Judge M'Lean, of the Supreme Court of the United States: "Statutes against fundamental morality are void."

In the Congress of the United States, the Hon. R. C. Winthrop recognized the truth of the principle I have maintained in this discourse. Said he: "I recognize, indeed, a Power above all human lawmakers, and a code above all earthly constitutions; and, whenever I perceive a clear conflict of jurisdiction and authority between the constitution of my country and the law of my God, my course is clear."

If the example of the Christian martyrs, the general sentiment of the church, and a strong array of eminent and learned authorities, can settle such a point, we have clearly made out the duty of every Christian to take his stand on the law of God, and refuse obedience to any human law that commands what is contrary to it.

One other point only remains to be discussed. It is this: Who shall be the judge when this conflict of divine and human laws occurs? Who shall determine what is the divine law? Who shall say when a human law is contrary to the precepts of Christianity, or when it commands what is morally wrong? To these questions the answer is plain: Every man for himself, on his own responsibility as a moral and accountable being. There is no other tribunal than his own conscience and the word

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of God to which he can refer such a question. He knows of no Pope or other infallible head of the church on earth to which he can refer it. As a Protestant Christian, he has taken the Bible as his rule of faith and practice, and must interpret it in the exercise of his own private judgment. The conclusions to which he arrives in this way must govern his moral conduct in every relation of life. Shall the government interpret the law of God to his conscience, or decide for him what his religion teaches in reference to any particular duty? This would be to make the government a Pope, God's vicegerent on earth. Would it not be better in such a case to transfer the government at once to the Pope of Rome, and acknowledge him as our supreme law-giver and head?

No: the Christian citizen reserves to himself the right to judge in every case whether the legislation of the government is consistent with the law of God, and how far it is his duty to obey it. In the language of President Wayland, "If it commands him to do wrong, he will regard it as he would any other command to do wrong: he will not obey it." No man can give up his enlightened conscience to the magistrate. To quote still further this eminent Christian moralist and divine: "The Christian is at liberty to inquire whether any act of the government transgresses the limit within which its action is by reason and revelation restricted; *and yet more to determine concerning every one of its actions, whether it be right or wrong.* At liberty, did I say? He is more than at liberty: he is obliged thus to inquire and to determine. He is a party to every act of the society of which he is a member. He is an intelligent moral agent, responsible to God for his actions, whether they be personal or associated; and therefore he must think about civil government, and act about it, according to the light which God has given him, all things else to the contrary notwithstanding."*

* Sermons on the Obedience due to Civil Magistrates.

“The right of deciding all these points,” says Professor Hodge, “and of determining where the obligation of obedience ceases and the duty of resistance (disobedience) begins, must, from the nature of the case, rest with the subject, and not with the ruler. The apostles and early Christians decided this point for themselves. Like all other questions of duty, it is to be decided on our responsibility to God and our fellow-men.”

If the apostles and martyrs had conceded to the civil government the right to judge whether its laws conflicted with the law of God or the duty of its subjects, it would have decided in its own favor, as every other government would do; and where then would have been the Christian religion, which has come down to us through their testimony, attested by their sufferings, and made sacred by their blood?

And now, my hearers, do you see any thing revolutionary or treasonable or seditious in these doctrines? If you do, it is more than I can see. I have advocated nothing contrary to the peaceful principles of Christianity. I maintain the duty of *submission* to the civil government, *but not the duty of obedience to its unjust laws*. This is an important distinction. I counsel no violence, no physical resistance to the law or its officers, but, on the contrary, a peaceful submission to their authority. Should a law be enacted which requires me to do an act contrary to natural justice, to the religion I profess, and clearly opposed to the divine law, or which forbids me to do what religion and humanity require I should do, I would calmly and firmly disobey that law, and suffer the penalty of disobedience. If the magistrate should see fit to punish me for it, I would bear it patiently for Christ's sake. “Every one must be convinced,” says President Wayland, “upon reflection, that this is really the course indicated by the highest moral excellence.”*

* Elements of Moral Science.

Can it be justly said that men who mark out such a course are dangerous citizens and enemies of the state? Are the Quakers, who have always maintained this position with respect to human governments, a dangerous class of citizens? Are they not, on the contrary, a most peaceable, law-abiding, and upright portion of the community? Were the primitive Christians dangerous subjects of the Roman empire? Were they ever detected in plots and conspiracies for the overthrow of the government? Did they not *submit* willingly to the laws, even those they had disobeyed; suffer the penalty without offering the least resistance, and go rejoicing to the stake, that they might be accounted worthy to suffer in the cause of their Lord and Master? Did not six thousand men and more of that Theban legion stand to be decimated and cut down by the sword, with arms in their hands, rather than lift them against the emperor? What danger has a government to apprehend from such men? They are only demagogues and dishonest politicians who pretend it. These are the peace-men, the disinterested patriots and reformers of our time, who seek the true welfare and glory of the country; who would save the government from war, unrighteousness, and oppression, and restore it to its original foundations, justice, freedom, and the rights of man. These are the last men it can afford to alienate from its support. When it shall drive them from its councils, and commit its interests and direction to corrupt and unprincipled men; when it shall disregard the moral sense of the best portion of its subjects, and enact laws that are a disgrace to an enlightened and Christian age; when it shall scorn and defy God's higher law, written in his holy word and on the tablets of the human heart, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and require its people to trample on that holy precept of our religion, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them;" and, con-

tinuing long in such a course, shall fill up the measure of its iniquity,—then farewell the union of these States! farewell the peace and liberty that still remain to bless our land! Then shall we say, Alas! our country! her desolation draweth nigh!

In taking our leave of this subject, let us bear in our memory the glorious example of the Christian martyrs:—

“Their holy lives were nobly spent
From sin and woe their race to save :
The wrong they labored to prevent
Has shed a halo round their grave.” *

Let us strive to imitate their fidelity to truth, to conscience, and the law of God; and should the corruption and wickedness of the times in which we live demand similar sacrifices of us, may we have the undoubting faith and moral courage to follow their example! There is great need at the present time that we should stand by the principles they so nobly vindicated by their lives. Let no man persuade you, that, in any conflict between the laws of the State and the laws of God, you can obey both.† It is one of the devices of despotism. The authorities of the Roman government, in some instances, preached the same doctrine to the Christians; but they knew better, and so do we. There is but one standard of right; and that is the moral law, as revealed in the Scriptures and in the intuitions of the human soul.

A moral warfare is now going on between the principles I have endeavored to illustrate and defend, and the doctrine of unconditional obedience to magistrates and civil rulers. May God give us strength to maintain the righteous cause, and raise up just and good men to defend it! We cannot

* Mrs. Follen.

† This doctrine has recently been maintained in a charge of Judge Sprague, one of the Judges of the United States Court for the District of Massachusetts.

have too many such, in whom the spirit of our Puritan ancestors, and the faith and courage of the ancient martyrs, shall live and act again.

In concluding this extended discourse, let me exhort you to consider the subject with candor and impartiality, in the fear of God, and with a sincere desire to know your duty; and then decide upon that course which seems to you most in accordance with the principles of true religion, the duty of the Christian citizen, and the true glory and welfare of the state.

“By all for which the martyrs bore their agony and shame;
By all the warning words of truth for which the prophets came;
By the Future which awaits us; by all the hopes which cast
Their faint and trembling beams across the blackness of the Past;
And by the blessed thought of Him who for earth’s millions died,
O my people! O my brothers! let us choose the righteous side.” *

* John G. Whittier.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE.

Since this discourse was delivered, I have met with some persons who profess to admit the doctrine it maintains, but say it does not apply to the recent law for the delivery of fugitive slaves to their masters, which is continually suggested throughout the discourse. In reply, I can only say, that, if the analogy is so perfect between this law and those which the martyrs felt called to disobey as to keep it continually before the mind, this fact goes very far to prove that it comes under the same denomination of laws. The whole question, of course, turns on the point whether this law requires us to violate the law of God, or do a moral wrong. This point it was not my purpose in the present discourse to consider; having a few months previously devoted a sermon to that subject. But it may be proper enough here to say, that he who does not perceive it to be morally wrong to enslave a human being, or to compel one by force to return to such a state after escaping from it, would not be likely to feel the force of any argument that could be used on the subject. If to send a human being, against his will, and innocent of crime, into a state of slavery, where he is treated as an article of property, and not as a man; where all his rights are taken away, and he and his posterity doomed to a life of hopeless and unrewarded toil; denied all moral and intellectual improvement; denied the sacred institution of marriage; denied the protection of female chastity; denied the attributes of humanity; bought and sold and driven in herds like cattle and swine; separated from each other, husband and wife, father and mother and child, for ever,—if this is no moral wrong, and does not violate God's law of natural justice, and the Christian rule, that "whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them," then in Heaven's name what is a moral wrong? what is contrary to God's law? The man who cannot see that this is sin, God forgive him, and have mercy on his poor, benighted soul!

LETTER

TO THE

FIRST CHURCH AND CONGREGATION IN WEST
BRIDGEWATER, MASS.

It is but a few weeks since I tendered you a resignation of my office as your Pastor, which you have since accepted. Before the third year of my ministry among you had expired, it is thus brought to an abrupt conclusion. That it had been a useful ministry until we became divided on the slavery question, is, I believe, universally acknowledged. The congregations have been larger, on an average, than for thirty years; the church has received important accessions; and a larger salary has been paid than during any former period of the society's history.

In taking my leave of you, I have preached no farewell sermon. It has been a sudden step on my part, influenced by the opposition I saw growing up in the parish to my speaking upon, or alluding in any way to, the great sin of this nation,—the support of American Slavery, and the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law. In tendering my resignation, however, I announced to the parish my intention to address you a letter reviewing my ministry in regard to this question, and now proceed to fulfil my purpose, which I shall endeavor to do in a fraternal and Christian spirit. My object is to lay before you certain facts which I hope may have a favorable influence on your future action, and to place my ministry in its true light.

I shall give a statement of the opposition that has been brought against me on account of a few discourses in which I have discussed or alluded to the subject of slavery; and then proceed to show what was the understanding, at the time of my settlement, in regard to this question; what my preaching has been on the subject; and who has violated the understanding.

During the first year and a half of my ministry, I had enjoyed perfect freedom in the discussion of the various questions of reform that agitate the religious and moral world. I had preached occasionally on the sin of American slavery; on the extent to which this nation is involved in it; and on the duty of Christians to resist its encroachments, to withhold all voluntary support and sanction of it, and to exert all their influence and power for its removal. Though I was sensible that there were a few influential persons in the congregation who entertained strong prejudices against such preaching, I supposed they were convinced of my sincerity, and were willing to tolerate it occasionally, since I had expressly stipulated in my engagement with the parish that I should sometimes preach on this subject. The great body of the congregation — some of them agreeing, and others dissenting — appeared perfectly willing to *hear* what I had to say upon it; and thus all things went on well, the society enjoying great prosperity and harmony under my labors.

During the summer of 1850, the Congress of the United States enacted that wicked and unchristian law for the recapture and delivery of human beings into slavery which has so disturbed and agitated the country. The measure was carried by the influence and support of Daniel Webster, a Whig Senator from Massachusetts; passed by a Whig administration; and approved by a Whig President. Though it was at first received with loathing and abhorrence throughout the Free States, very soon the leading politicians and editors of both the old political parties, with a few honorable exceptions, began to fall in with the measure; the law was put in force in New York, and its execution threatened in Massachusetts.

While the Bill was under consideration in Congress, I had preached a Fast-day sermon, entitled “Duties of the Christian Citizen,” in which I maintained the duty of Christians calmly to disobey, without forcible resistance, any human statute in conflict with the divine law or the clearly revealed principles of our religion; submitting peaceably to its penalties, with a moral protest against its iniquity. I then referred to this contemplated law as such an instance, should it be enacted, and enjoined upon my hearers the superior obligations of God’s law. A few weeks later, I uttered similar sentiments in reference to the proposed law in a sermon on “The Christian Ministry;” and in neither instance was

any opposition manifested. My salary was easily and promptly subscribed about the same time ; no one refusing, or objecting to the course I had pursued.

But, after the Bill had become a law in the manner I have stated, and the Whig party had become responsible for it, a change came over the minds of certain of my Whig parishioners. It now became apparent to them, that my humble expositions of the gospel were in conflict with the interests and newly adopted policy of their party ; and they were no longer willing to hear such sentiments promulgated from the pulpit.

Now, it happened that these men were some of them persons of wealth and influence in the community, highly respectable, but not religious men. They were not members of the church, with perhaps a single exception, and have never taken upon themselves the character of disciples of Jesus Christ. They might properly be set down as *patrons* of the gospel, willing to patronize it so long as it agrees with their political creed and worldly interests, but no longer. Others of them were of less respectability and influence, and of no religious character, who might be said, generally, to adopt their opinions second-hand and follow blindly the leaders of their party ; among whom also were a few persons of the baser sort, who usually spend their evenings with their comrades at the village-store, discussing principles far above their comprehension in a low and vulgar manner, and setting on foot the scandal of the neighborhood. From some of these persons I foresaw that I must encounter a fierce and malignant opposition. They were a class of men not likely to sever their party connections, or hesitate to follow its leadings, from moral and religious considerations. I saw that they were governed by an unscrupulous party spirit as the fall elections approached, and that the gentle pleadings of humanity and the teachings of Jesus Christ appealed to them in vain ; that Daniel Webster was *their* great leader, and no other could come between him and them, not even the Saviour of the world. The result has proved that I was not mistaken. They who at first condemned the Fugitive Slave Law became its open apologists and advocates, and the supporters of the men who procured its enactment.

Notwithstanding this change in the position and feelings of some of my parishioners, I could not see that my duty had changed. If what I had preached before it happened was true

then, it was just as true afterwards, and needed still more to be preached, since there was another class of hearers who looked to the pulpit for moral instruction, and were anxious to know their duty. I was extremely desirous not to offend anybody; several months had elapsed since I had alluded to the subject; the unrighteous thing had become the law of the land; steps were taken to enforce it in Massachusetts; and it had become a serious question what was a Christian's duty under the circumstances. I felt a necessity laid upon me, as far as I was able, to enlighten the consciences of my hearers on the subject. It was my business and calling to do so, and I determined to do my duty.

I accordingly prepared a calm, dispassionate sermon on the iniquity of the law; its conflict with the law of God, as revealed in the Scriptures of divine truth; its opposition to the principles of our holy religion and the dictates of humanity; and the duty of Christians to disregard it entirely, to disobey its provisions, and unresistingly and peaceably submit to its penalties. Having previously announced my purpose to preach on the subject solely from a moral and religious point of view, stating that I felt moved by a sense of duty, and desired a calm and patient hearing, I was somewhat surprised to find a portion of the congregation absent when the time arrived. I preached the sermon, however, and it was afterward published. It gave great offence among the class of persons I have mentioned, though some of them did not hear it. It was called a political sermon, though there was not the slightest allusion to any political party in it; and suddenly a number of persons who had previously sustained me in the same general course of preaching became very conscientious, and had scruples of conscience about supporting a minister with such principles. Intimations of a withdrawal of support were thrown out, and of the necessity of my resigning my place; while others, dissenting from my conclusions, regretted I had preached the sermon, but remained firm in their support of my ministry. I was accused of having designed to aid the election of a Free Soil representative to the General Court, and, as such a representative was chosen by a single vote, of having actually elected him; though I did not vote myself, and had uniformly kept aloof from all political associations whatsoever.

If men were influenced by moral and religious considerations to vote in a more conscientious manner, and were governed in a

greater degree by Christian principles in the selection of their rulers and law-makers, I think it right that religion should have so much to do with politics at least; and, if my discourse had this effect, I have no reason to regret preaching it. If the people of the Free States had been more careful to choose Christian men to represent them in the councils of the nation, and held them to a stricter accountability, we should not have had the Fugitive Slave Law.

But my discourse had a higher aim than this. It was that I might influence my hearers, not only to seek its repeal by all constitutional and Christian means, but to help make it a dead letter on the statute-book, incapable of being executed by reason of the moral force that should be arrayed against it.* It was a matter of perfect indifference to me, as it is now, by what political party this law is repealed, only so that it is repealed. What I urge is, that God's law and word shall be respected; and that the Christian religion and the rights of humanity shall not be trampled under foot by the government, let who will administer it. It is a source of gratification to me to know, that, notwithstanding the opposition I have encountered on account of that sermon, it did influence even one person in favor of the right; and that nine-tenths of the church, or the more religious part of the society, though a minority of the whole congregation, heartily approved of it.

* It was the opinion of Dr. Channing, that "no law, no constitution, can prevail against the moral convictions of the people. These are stronger than parchments, statutes, or tribunals. There is a feeling in regard to slavery spreading rapidly which cannot be withstood. It is not fanaticism, a fever; but a calm, moral, religious persuasion; and whatever in our institutions opposes this will be a dead letter. No violence is needed to annul a law which the moral feelings of a free community condemn. The simple abstinence of the people from action in favor of an unrighteous law, and the displeasure with which they visit such as are officious in its support, will avail more than armies."—(Channing's Works, vol. vi., p. 318.) It was my aim to strengthen these convictions, of which Channing speaks, among my people. In another place he says: "A State obeying this (the provision of the Constitution for returning fugitive slaves) seems to me to contract as great guilt as if it were to bring slaves from Africa. No man who regards slavery as among the greatest of wrongs can in any way reduce his fellow-creatures to it. The flying slave asserts the first rights of a man, and should meet aid rather than obstruction. Who that has the heart of a freeman, or breathes the love of a Christian, can send him back to his chain?"—(Works, vol. vi., p. 77.)

From this time onward, a spirit of cavilling and fault-finding took possession of those who were disaffected. Several months afterward, I preached an historical discourse on "The Christian Martyrs;" hoping to convince them, by a strong array of eminent examples, authority, and argument, that there are cases in which it is a Christian's duty to disobey the laws of the land, and peaceably suffer the penalty; but it was of no use; — they were more offended than ever. That discourse is now published for the first time along with this letter, at the request and by the contributions of the friends of Christian liberty in the parish.

A few weeks afterward, as we were approaching the beginning of a new parochial year (April 1, 1851), seeing the extent of the disaffection, I tendered a resignation of my place from the pulpit, with some remarks upon it. This produced a re-action in favor of my remaining. A number of dissatisfied persons expressed themselves to that effect. Some were afraid it would break up the society, if I left; and so I was persuaded to leave the matter with the parish, to which I addressed a letter, stating what ground I must occupy if I remained. The following extract will show that there was no room for any misunderstanding as to my course in future: —

"During the two years of my ministry spent among you, I have desired to do you only good; to impart to you and your children exalted views of religion and humanity; to attract you to the Saviour, that you may be converted to his truth, and saved by his grace; to interest you in the condition of all those for whom he suffered and died; to quicken your consciences in regard to the rights of your fellow-men, and their claim upon your Christian sympathy; and to urge you to the performance of every Christian duty. That I have done all this very imperfectly I know: but such has been my aim; and, if I felt now that I could serve you acceptably and still remain faithful to my divine Master, I should be most happy to do so. . . .

"It cannot but happen, in the course of a ministry of any considerable duration, that a faithful minister will sometimes differ from many of his congregation, and they from him. But it is much better that such differences should be allowed to pass without contention and strife than to make them the occasion of stirring up the evil passions of men, and unsettling the foundations of so sacred a relation as that which a minister sustains to his people. It is an easy thing for either party to find fault; but it were far better to exercise a broad and liberal charity, and a mutual toleration when differences arise.

"The mission of a Christian minister is not so much to please his people

as it is to inculcate Christian principles; to reprove their worldliness, selfishness, and hardness of heart; and to call them to repentance and a Christian life. If he is at all faithful to his duty, he is sure to encounter their prejudices, and often to provoke the animosity of those who are unwilling to submit to the requirements of religion. It is therefore a question for your consideration, whether it is better to have such a minister, at the risk of being sometimes displeased with him; or one that will pander to the prejudices of his hearers, and lower the standard of Christian truth to suit their habits, feelings, and preconceived opinions.

"If you wish it, I am willing to remain, with the understanding, which I supposed had always existed between us, that there is to be a mutual toleration of all differences of opinion on moral questions, and a free utterance from the pulpit on all subjects that concern the moral and spiritual welfare of mankind, — including all those reforms which have for their object the abolition of war and slavery, and the establishment of peace and righteousness in the world. Unless this understanding continues, I cannot remain."

At the parish meeting, this letter was read, and a vote passed to pay me my usual salary for the ensuing year, as though nothing had happened. All this took place without the slightest opposition; there being a full attendance of all parties, and the disaffected generally voting in favor of the motion. Every one supposed now that all difficulty was at an end. In soliciting subscriptions, however, it was found that there were three persons, — two of them aged and honorable men (I say nothing of the third), — the largest supporters I had, who declined to subscribe any thing. The deficiency, however, was promptly made up, and I withdrew my resignation, knowing that these two gentlemen were personally friendly to me, having otherwise befriended me, and that they would interpose no obstacle to my success.

From this time forward until the close of my labors in this place, a period of four months, I made but two passing allusions to the subject of slavery; yet the cavilling and fault-finding spirit continued with unabated zeal on the part of a few low-minded persons who would not let the subject rest. I was supposed to have a hidden meaning in my words, and to be personal in my discourses, when it was the farthest from my thoughts. I became more and more the subject of ungenerous criticism, and finally of gossip and scandal, from these persons, until I felt compelled, by a regard for the peace and comfort of myself and family, to seek another settlement. In this I was immediately successful, and have already entered on a new field of labor highly advantageous

to myself, and with encouraging prospects of usefulness and success. Thus ends a brief sketch of the pro-slavery influences by which my ministry has been brought to a close in West Bridgewater.

Before proceeding with the remainder of this letter, I ought to state, that through all this trial I was sustained by the hearty sympathy and generous support of the more religious portion of the society. Although the opposition was waged on political grounds, I had no affiliation with any party as such, and numbered among my friends and supporters persons of all parties. A few of the best friends I had were Whigs, and condemned the opposition that arrayed itself against me; while the larger number were of the Free Soil party, though not one of them, I think, supported me on political or party grounds, but entirely from religious considerations and a desire to sustain the proper freedom and independence of the pulpit. From these true and faithful friends I regret to be separated; but they know the difficult and trying circumstances in which I was placed, and kindly approve of the step I have taken, while they express deep regret at the necessity.

I now proceed to show what was the understanding had with this parish at the time of my settlement in regard to all questions of reform, and the anti-slavery question in particular; what my ministry has been on these questions; and who has violated the understanding.

When I received an invitation to become your minister in the spring of 1849, it was known to the parish that I was strongly imbued with reformatory principles, the advocate of Peace, Temperance, Freedom, and the Rights of Man. The very first sermon I preached here indicated my position on these subjects, and had given offence in another place and to another political party, because of a reflection it contained against the Mexican war, — facts with which you were well acquainted. That no such difficulty might arise in future, I was careful to define my position very distinctly in my letter of acceptance to the parish, and in my introductory sermon. The following extract is from the letter of acceptance: —

“ Allow me to say further, that I have a deep sympathy with the *reform movements* of the age, and feel it my duty to make such an application of Christian truth as will tend to diminish the causes of poverty and crime,

and aid in bringing about a state of society when *war, intemperance, and slavery, and all vindictive and oppressive legislation, shall be done away.* On these subjects [I now italicize these words to arrest attention] I desire to be free to express my convictions *from the pulpit* as often as duty may seem to require."

This letter was the basis, and formed part of the contract, of settlement between us. It expressly stipulated for the freedom of the pulpit on the subjects named. Much has been said about preaching against the laws of the land. Was it not the understanding that I should preach against "*unjust and oppressive legislation,*" should occasion arise? It is so entered on the records of your parish, where you will find this letter copied at the time. And did not the occasion arise when the government enacted the Fugitive Slave Law?

In my introductory discourse I find this passage:—

"I wish to say a few words in reference to the reforms of the age. From what has been said in a former part of this discourse, it will be seen that I regard Christianity as covering the whole of human life; as having to do with mankind in every relation and circumstance in which they can act. In no case can they divorce themselves from its requirements. I feel it a Christian duty, therefore, to labor for the reform of *oppression and vice, of public as well as private wrongs*; to advance the interests of *peace, temperance, and human freedom*; to maintain the right of the slave to himself,—to the use of his own powers for himself; and to urge the duty of dealing *justly* by all men, of doing unto others as we would they should do unto us. *On these subjects, therefore, I shall feel it my duty sometimes to speak more at length.*"

Such was the understanding fully and freely expressed at the time of my settlement, before I had moved my family among you, and when the slightest objection on account of these sentiments would have prevented my coming.

Sometimes I hear it said, that the first year and a half of my labors gave great satisfaction; and the question is asked, "Why could you not have continued on in the same way?" as though, with the preaching of the sermon against the Fugitive Slave Law, my course had been entirely changed. The truth is, that, during that year and a half, I had preached precisely the same sentiments I have preached since then, as my manuscripts will show. On Fast-day, a few days after I accepted your call, I discoursed against the punishment of death,—*a law of the land,*—which

was then about to be executed upon Washington Goode. Nobody called it preaching politics, or found any fault that I had preached on the subject, however they might have differed from me, or doubted the propriety of it.

On the next Fast-day (April, 1850), I discoursed on "The Duties of the Christian Citizen." The Fugitive Slave Bill was then under consideration in Congress, and the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts had come out "in favor of all its provisions to the fullest extent." Yet it was not known at that time that the Bill would pass, and become a measure of the administration; much less that the Whig party of Massachusetts would be brought into its support. My discourse, therefore, gave no offence, although it contained sentiments identical with the discourse preached on the same subject after these changes had taken place. Men who have since refused their subscriptions subscribed at that time readily and cheerfully, without a word of fault. I quote the following extracts from this discourse:—

"We are to render unto human governments that which is their due, and unto God that which is his due. The image of earthly rulers stamped on the coin signifies that their jurisdiction is over temporal affairs. The image of God stamped on the soul of man signifies that his jurisdiction is over the soul, the conscience, and the whole sphere of moral duties. If human governments do not transcend their proper limits, there will be no conflict between them and the divine. The duties of the Christian citizen will not clash. But if they require of us what is contrary to God's law, or a sacrifice of our moral principles; if they command us to do an act that is morally wrong, we are bound to disobey them, and take the consequences. We must not violate the law of God for any earthly consideration. In temporal matters we are to submit to the government; and, so far as its laws are according to the ordinances of God, it is our duty to render it obedience and homage; but no farther. This was the doctrine of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and in their faithful adherence to it they suffered martyrdom. They were put to death by the public authorities, according to the forms of Roman law, and were succeeded by a noble army of Christian martyrs, who illustrated the same doctrine, and met the same fate.

"And now I come to the practical application of this principle to our own circumstances as citizens of the state. We owe respect and obedience to the laws of the land, whose protection we enjoy, provided they do not conflict with the law of God, or command us to do what is morally wrong. This is what our religion teaches us; but, if the government clearly transcends this limit, we are released from all further obligation, and disobedience becomes a duty. The question that presents itself to our

minds is this : Has the government under which we live transcended this limit? There is one particular in which I think it has. As the Constitution of the United States has been interpreted by the legal tribunals of the country, we are required to deliver up our fellow-men, innocent of any crime except the color of their skin, to be carried into hopeless slavery, if it can be proved that they ever escaped from such a condition ; and a law is now in contemplation for that purpose. If this construction of the Constitution prevails and such a law is enacted, it is plainly contrary to natural justice and the law of God. If we can justify the Sultan of Turkey in refusing to deliver up Kossuth and his compatriots to Austrian oppression, and extend to them aid and sympathy, why should we not equally refuse to deliver up fugitives from a worse than Austrian oppression? Are not the rights of human nature as sacred in America and in the person of Frederick Douglass, and his oppressed and injured race, as in the person of those who escape to us from the oppressions of a foreign land?

“ But it is said that this was a compact or compromise entered into by our fathers, and we must fulfil it. If this were true, I ask, is such a compact binding upon their posterity? It is a principle of the Common Law, that all statutes and contracts, and even an act of Parliament, contrary to natural justice, or that require the doing of an immoral act, are null and void. So much, therefore, of the Constitution of the United States as is supposed to require the delivery of a fugitive slave to his master ought to become a dead letter, or receive the better construction of which it is capable; making it apply only to such persons as, by indenture or legal contract, *owe* service from which they have escaped into another State. At any rate it should be left to the States to pass such laws as are necessary to carry the clause into effect, since it creates no obligation on the part of Congress, and confers no power, to legislate on the subject.

“ There is another consideration which relieves us of any obligation to return fugitive slaves. The framers of the Constitution never designed this clause to be of perpetual obligation. They acted under the conviction, that slavery would gradually disappear in all the States after the discontinuance of the African Slave-trade; and they purposely adopted a disguised phraseology, so that it might not appear in after-ages that there were any traces of such an institution under the Constitution. The time to which they looked forward for the consummation of this event has more than arrived; the enlightened conscience of the Christian world is now in open conflict with this sin; and, in all justice and good faith, the Free States, having themselves abolished it, are released from this obligation. It ought no longer to be insisted on by the Southern States, since it is by their own wrong, and in opposition to the principles of justice and humanity, that they have perpetuated this wicked institution. If, however, all these considerations avail nothing, and a law is passed requiring us to capture the fugitive, and deliver him to his master to be carried into slavery, we know that such a law is contrary to the Christian religion, and we ought not to obey it.

“ I hope I shall live to see the peaceful removal of this unchristian insti-

